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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [AM](#)
SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT TAKES BACK MEDIA BILL

REF: YEREVAN 1368

Classified By: CDA A. F. Godfrey for reasons 1.4 (b, d).

¶1. (U) The government withdrew a controversial bill on media with a promise to revise it after parliamentarians walked out on a floor vote. A quorum of parliamentarians were present at the start of the October 3 session, but when it came time to vote on the bill, many of them, including at least 20 members of the coalition, walked out. Of 131 deputies, 46 voted for the bill, and one voted against it. Some opposition members stayed in the room but didn't vote. After the failed vote, the government withdrew the bill with a pledge to revise it, particularly the section of the bill that would prohibit the production of television spots by production companies that are not licensed television broadcasters.

¶2. (C) Jill Pender, the American citizen chief of party of the USAID Armenian Legislative Strengthening Project, told us the incident represents a breakdown in party discipline. Pender said parliamentary deputies don't respect National Assembly Speaker Tigran Torosyan, who lacks the charisma of his predecessor, Artur Baghdasarian.

¶3. (C) During a dinner with visiting DAS Matt Bryza on October 4, Justice Minister David Harutyunian denied that the government was trying to ramrod through the new media law. He said that he expected and welcomed vigorous debate between the first and second readings of the law, but would be pleased to engage in this debate now, before the first reading. DAS Bryza pushed for including in the next draft the views of all stakeholders. Harutyunian agreed, and said the text of the current draft is on his Ministry's Web site and that he would engage seriously with any group that presented written comment. He said he would not, however, respond to unproductive statements to the press.

¶4. (C) COMMENT: The level of protest against the government's attempts to push its bill through is unusual. It is also encouraging, though it may be that parliamentarians are only interested in this bill because it could reduce the amount of television exposure they receive (reftel). As elections approach, party discipline will likely continue to break down and the government may not find its pet legislature so pliant. Justice Minister Harutyunian has a good reputation as a competent, reform-oriented technocrat, but he is a bit of a Luddite. He had no idea how profitable Armenia's television market had become. After our discussion, we may see signs that Harutyunian will be more skeptical of broadcasters' pleas to enhance revenue, especially from Public TV, which receives a hefty subsidy.
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